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Ezra Overview



Bible Book Overviews - Steve Gregg

In this overview provided by Steve Gregg, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are discussed as being originally one book in the Hebrew Bible but were separated in the Greek Septuagint. The focus is on Ezra, who was likely the author of both Chronicles and Ezra, and led a wave of exiles back to Jerusalem to provide spiritual guidance and bring reforms. The book of Ezra is considered an important historical document that shows God's plan even in painful situations and Ezra is revered as an important figure in Jewish history and a reformer.

Transcript

I had considered doing an introduction of both Ezra and Nehemiah tonight. In fact, I had announced that that's what we would do. And as I was doing final preparations, I was seeing more and more that I wanted to say about Ezra and I realized that if I treat Ezra the way I want to, I will not be able to really do justice to Nehemiah.

And since we're under no deadlines to finish all the books of the Bible, we can take two different sessions for Ezra and Nehemiah. And might as well. It seems to me each of them is worthy of separate consideration.

Although in the Hebrew Bible, they were one book originally. And we've been saying that about quite a few of the books we've covered. In our Bible, we have 1 and 2 Samuel.

They were one book in the Hebrew Bible. We have 1 and 2 Kings. They were one book in the Hebrew Bible.

And we had 1 and 2 Chronicles. Also, they were one book in the Hebrew Bible. Now Ezra and Nehemiah was one book in the Hebrew Bible.

Why are there two of each in our Bible? It was because the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which was made in the 3rd century BC, required more pages. Because the Hebrew Bible didn't use vowels. The words are very short because they only use the consonants and the vowels are implied.

Whereas the Greek words, of course, they don't imply the vowels. They have the vowels and the consonants and they're very long words in many cases. So saying the same thing in Greek takes much more space.

And so when the Hebrew text was translated into Greek in the Septuagint, it was necessary to break these books into smaller bits to fit on individual scrolls. And so it was the Septuagint that created Ezra and Nehemiah as separate books. And in the Septuagint, the book of Ezra that we have in our Bible is actually called 2nd Ezra or 2nd Esdras.

Esdras is the Greek form of the name Ezra. And the Septuagint had a book already called Esdras, which was an apocryphal book. In other words, it's not really a book of the Bible per se.

It's one of the many apocrypha books that were written by non-inspired writers that were collectible. You see, the Septuagint was the Greek Old Testament, but it wasn't only the Greek Old Testament. It was a library of Hebrew books that were translated into Greek or written in Greek.

The interesting thing about the apocryphal books, they weren't translated from Hebrew into Greek. They were written in Greek. They were written at a period when Greek had become the language spoken by the civilized world, and that was after the time, actually, of the Hebrew scriptures.

The last Hebrew book of the Old Testament was Malachi, and that was during the Persian period. It was after that, by more than a century, that Alexander the Great had conquered that region and made Greek the universal language. So, after a certain point in the last three centuries before Christ came, books were normally written in Greek, and so the apocryphal books of the Old Testament are books that were written in that period of time.

After there were no more prophets sent to Israel, no more books were being written in Hebrew. Esdras was an apocryphal book written in Greek. It became called First Esdras when our canonical book was added to the Septuagint, and ours was called Second Esdras.

So, that's kind of confusing, I'm sure, but that's just something about the history of the book and how these came to be two books, actually, Ezra and Nehemiah. Now, the book of Ezra deals with two distinctly different periods after the Babylonian exile. All the historical books that we have studied so far, and that's been all of the ones in the Bible thus far, have been pre-exilic.

Pre-exilic means they are history that happened before the exile, before the Babylonian captivity. And the last historical book we saw was, of course, Second Chronicles. And if

you'll look just one page before Ezra, you'll see the last page of Second Chronicles, and you'll find that it is in that chapter, Second Chronicles 36, that you read about the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and the Jews being taken captive into Babylon.

Now, they remained there for a few generations. Of course, you think of the Babylonian exile as 70 years, partly because Jeremiah had said in Jeremiah 25, 11, and 12, that the Jews would be servants of Babylon for 70 years. And they were, but they weren't exiles of Babylon for that whole time.

Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar basically exerted his sovereignty over Judah as early as 605 BC, but the exile didn't take place until 586 BC, so it's like 20 years difference, something like that. What happened was that Nebuchadnezzar had conquered the Assyrian Empire, and the most decisive battle of his conquest was in 605 BC. After that, he came down and asserted himself, his power, down in Jerusalem.

He didn't destroy it or do anything like that. He just took some captives and took them back to Babylon. So in 605 BC, Jerusalem was basically at the mercy of Nebuchadnezzar, and the captives that were taken into Babylon included Daniel and Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego in 605 BC.

A few years later, in 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar came back and took some more captives. He still didn't destroy the city or anything like that, but he took some more captives among the Jews back to Babylon, and those included Ezekiel. So Ezekiel went into captivity in the second wave in 597 BC.

And finally, because of a rebellion against him, King Zedekiah was put down in 586 BC, and that's when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. That's when the temple was burned down, and that's when the Jews, most of them that were living in that region, were carried away to Babylon. That begins what we would probably call the exile, although Daniel and Ezekiel had been in exile much earlier.

So you could, in a sense, date the exile from 605 BC, but it really only affected a few Jewish people. It affected the whole nation when the capital city was burned down and destroyed and the population was taken en masse back into Babylonian dominion. And that was 586.

Now, Ezra begins in the year 539. So if you do the math, I don't know if you're better than me in math, is that 47 years, something like that? And so that would be the actual period of the exile. There were still quite a few Jews alive in Babylon who had gone into the exile 47 years earlier, and we read about them in Ezra sometimes, but most of the people, probably the population turned over at least a couple generations.

That is to say, there were probably a generation born immediately upon the coming into Babylon, and that generation would have children, and some of them maybe even

grandchildren, before the exile ended. This is, I think, the fulfillment of the threat that God made to Israel when he gave them the Ten Commandments, and he gave them the command, you should not make graven images and bow down because I'm a jealous God, and I visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation. I believe he's predicting that someday, if Israel becomes sold onto idolatry, as they did, that he would bring a punishment on them, which he did, which would extend to the third and fourth generation of their ancestors who had done the crimes and gone into Babylon.

I think the Babylonian exile is that threat being fulfilled. In any case, in 2 Chronicles 36, we find the destruction of Jerusalem, we find the exile into Babylon, and then at the end of 2 Chronicles, it says in verse 22, the very last verses of 2 Chronicles, Now, in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, now the previous verse was about the exile, but when you come to the first year of Cyrus, this is when Babylon fell some 47 years later to the Persians, and Cyrus was the conquering king of the Persians who overthrew the Babylonian exile. And so all those regions that had come under Babylon's dominion, including Israel, were now under Persian dominion under Cyrus.

So between, in 2 Chronicles, between verse 21 and 22 of the last chapter, there's this gap of close to 50 years, and it anticipates the end of the exile. And we have a few verses about it. Verse 22 says, Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that's 539 BC, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled.

Remember, Jeremiah had predicted in Jeremiah 25, 11, and 12 that the Babylonian exile would last 70 years. There are several ways to calculate that 70. The actual period of time from 605 BC, which you could date it from, to 586 BC is just a, falls a little short of 70, but not much.

But there's an exact date when the temple was destroyed in 586 BC to the time it was rebuilt in the time of Ezra in 516 BC. That's exactly 70 years. So there's more than one way to calculate the 70 years, but the period of time that most of the Jews were in Babylon was shorter than that.

And so the writer is, and we believe the writer of 2 Chronicles is probably Ezra himself. That's the Jewish tradition, it seems likely. He says that it was so that Jeremiah's prophecy would be fulfilled.

Now that's how Chronicles ends, but look how Ezra begins. Now in the first year of Cyrus, the king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled. Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put in a writing, verbatim, from Chronicles.

However, Ezra gives the written decree of Cyrus more completely, because the decree is

summarized in a single verse at the end of Chronicles, whereas we've got its entirety in Ezra. But you can see that the first verse of Ezra is essentially identical to the last verse of 2 Chronicles. Both of them give the decree of Cyrus in one form or another.

Ezra gives the longer version. But you can see that the verbatim language of Ezra in 2 Chronicles tends to support the Jewish tradition that Ezra is the author of Chronicles, as well as the book of Ezra. Although it's possible somebody else was the author of both.

Yet Ezra is the most likely, and the tradition is that it was Ezra. Now, although Ezra is a major character in the book of Ezra, he doesn't appear in the book until chapter 7. The first six chapters are about the return of exiles who responded to Cyrus' decree and went back to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. But this was probably before Ezra was born, almost certainly before he was born.

And the leader of the group that took the exiles back initially in the first six chapters of Ezra was a man named Zerubbabel. And Zerubbabel was made the governor of the exiles. He was actually a grandson of King Jeconiah.

So he was actually of the Davidic kingly line, though he was not made king. He was a vassal under the Persian king, as Ezra remained, until they became vassals under Greece. And then they became vassals under Rome, until the time that Christ came and beyond.

So Ezra was a vassal for hundreds of years. But now they were vassals of Persia, and the Persian king allowed Zerubbabel to be the governor of the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. Now, Zerubbabel had as his assistant leading the people a high priest who was directly descended from Zadok and from the high priestly line.

His name was, in Ezra, he's called Jeshua. In Haggai and Zechariah, the same man is called Joshua. Of course, his name probably in Hebrew would have been pronounced Yeshua.

And that's the same name as, of course, our Lord owned when he was on earth. They named him Yeshua, and the English form of that would be Joshua. I should say that Joshua is more like an anglicized version of the Hebrew.

It translates into Greek as Jesus, and in English as Jesus. It's a long story. Different languages vocalize things differently.

But the point here is that the name Joshua was the name of the high priest who served alongside Zerubbabel in the first six chapters of Ezra. And we have the story there of the rebuilding of the temple, a most significant thing, because it is the end of a period of exactly 70 years that the period that the temple had laid in ruins. After chapter six, however, it skips over a period of 59 or 60 years.

It tells us nothing about that period. And in chapter seven, we are now 60 years later than chapter six. And that's where Ezra appears.

That's why I said that Ezra almost certainly was not born yet in the time of Zerubbabel's activities, because after Zerubbabel was done building the temple, it was another 60 years before Ezra, probably as a young adult rather than as an old man, led another group of exiles back. Zerubbabel led 50,000, almost 50,000, 49,650 or something like that. Very close to 50,000 exiles went back to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel in the first wave, in the first six chapters.

Ezra came back 60 years later and brought with him some, I think around 2,000 exiles returned with him. Certainly the biggest wave had come with the first group under Zerubbabel. Ezra came, and his story is in chapters seven, eight, nine, and 10, and that takes us to the end of the book of Ezra.

And he came at a later date, and he came not as a builder because the temple was now built before he came along, but he came because the community in Jerusalem needed spiritual guidance. And he was a Bible teacher. He was a scribe and a priest.

He came from priestly lines just like Joshua did, and so he had access to the temple as a priest would, but he was also a Bible scholar, what they call a scribe. And he came to bring reforms. He came to whip the community into shape and bring them into conformity with what God's word said.

So the first leader, Zerubbabel, who's in chapters one through six, is largely a political, hands-on kind of builder, supervisor, governor of the people, assisted by a priest. And then Ezra comes, he's more of a religious figure, a priest and a Bible teacher. Later on, Nehemiah came back also, probably about 13 years after Ezra did.

And Nehemiah was neither a priest nor a governor nor a prophet nor anything special. He was just a cup bearer, that's a wine taster, for the Persian king. They had to have someone taste their wine before they drank it because people might want to poison them.

So they'd have somebody very expendable available to taste their food and their wine before the kings would drink theirs. And Nehemiah was a cup bearer for Artaxerxes, a later Persian king. And he was just a layman, but he was a contractor, I guess.

He went back and he did some building, helped build the walls of the city. So we've got different waves here. Now, when we come to Ezra, we're coming to a third important phase of Jewish history.

The first phase of Jewish history after the Exodus was the time of Moses, Joshua, and the judges. In other words, pre-monarchy. Israel did not have a king during those periods of time, and they served God using a tabernacle, a tent.

And it was the center of worship, it was the center of society for Israel because they had on many occasions through the year, they were required to come to where the tabernacle was and have festivals a week long, three times a year and so forth. So they couldn't get very far from the worship of God. But the Ark of the Covenant was in the tabernacle during that time.

When the monarchy period started, soon afterwards Solomon built a temple. And from Solomon to the end of 2 Chronicles, when the temple was burned down by the Babylonians, we call that the first temple period. From Solomon to the end of the Jewish state and the Babylonian exile.

That's the first temple period. And then with the beginning of Zerubbabel's temple, we have the beginning of the second temple period. And that lasted up through the time that Christ lived through and until the destruction of that same temple in AD 70 by the Romans.

There has not been a third temple. Many people believe there will be. It is one of the views of one of the prominent eschatological camps that there will be a third temple.

In my opinion, that's not clearly predicted anywhere, but I guess that's one of those wait and see kind of things. Are the Jews going to rebuild their temple or not? They'd like to. At least some of them would.

There are Jews who are hoping to rebuild the temple and there may yet be a third temple period. But there have been two temple periods. And scholars talk about first temple Judaism and second temple Judaism as having various distinctives.

The temples are different, mostly the same in basic structure. But Solomon's temple is much superior to Ezra's temple. Not Ezra's, Zerubbabel's temple that we read about in Ezra.

But we have the beginning of a rebirth of the nation of Israel. The Babylonian exile in principle is not very different than the hundreds of years the Jews had spent in Egypt before Moses led them out. The whole family of Israel had been taken into Egypt in the time of Joseph and became captives there.

And so the beginning of the first period of worship where the tabernacle was built began with them escaping from Egypt and going through the wilderness and so forth and then coming with Joshua into the promised land. And that established them as a nation initially after the exodus. But then they ceased to be a nation in 586 BC.

Their temple was destroyed. Their capital city was razed to the ground. Their leaders were blinded and killed.

And they were the people carried away into captivity. There was no Jewish nation

anywhere on the planet. There were Jewish people in various countries in what was now the diaspora, the dispersion of the Jews throughout the Gentile world.

But there was no nation of Israel. There had been beginning in Moses' day. But there ceased to be in the days of Zedekiah and Jeconiah.

So now we have the birth of the nation again, almost like the exodus. They're in captivity in a foreign land. But God supernaturally moves to get them released, puts it on the heart of Cyrus, let them go.

And now they go back and they are reestablished, rebirthed as a nation. And they continued as that nation, although as vassals under other greater states, until AD 70 when the Romans destroyed them again. And did exactly the same thing the Babylonians had done in 586 BC.

So Israel has had two lifetimes. One was from Moses until the exile. The other was from the exile, that is after the exile, the time we're reading about here, till AD 70.

And so we're reading about something almost as significant as the exodus itself. The book of Ezra tells us about the birth of the nation of Israel a second time. And this time it's that Israel that Jesus came to.

It's that temple that Jesus preached in. It's that temple that Jesus predicted not one stone would be left standing on another that would not be thrown down because they did not recognize the time of their visitation. This is that period of history that begins in the book of Ezra.

And it begins with Cyrus. Cyrus could be considered in some ways a type of Christ. Because in a sense he brings them back from the dead, in a sense.

Now why would I say that? Well if you look at Ezekiel chapter 37, there's a famous vision of Ezekiel in chapter 37, called the dry bones. And I won't read the whole passage because we're not studying Ezekiel today, we're studying Ezra. But I just want to say that in the first ten verses, essentially Ezekiel has seen a vision of scattered dry human bones out in a wilderness.

They're not skeletons, they're just individual bones. And Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones, and he does, and they begin to rattle and to move and to reassemble into skeletons. They stand on their feet, and as he watches, they become full skeletons.

And then muscle and even skin and hair form on them. But they're not alive, there's no breath in them, there's no spirit in them it says. But they're standing there like a great army of corpses on their feet.

But no longer scattered bones. And then Ezekiel is told to prophesy to them a second

time, actually not to them, but to the spirit or to the wind, the same word in Hebrew and Greek. He prophesies to the wind or the spirit to come, and then they become alive.

Now the interpretation of that is given in Ezekiel 37, 12. Therefore prophesy and say to them, Thus says the Lord God, Behold, O my people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord when I have opened your graves, my people, and brought you up from your graves.

I will put my spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it, says the Lord. Now, this happened because of the decree of Cyrus, really.

It's like they were dead. In fact, the way he describes it, when he wants Ezekiel to understand what he's saying, what this whole thing is about, he said, These bones are the whole house of Israel. He says, They say our bones are dry and our hope is gone.

So it was the view of the Jews in exile that they were like dead. They were in graves. They were mere bones, dry bones out scattered across the desert wilderness in Babylon.

That's how they saw themselves. But the vision speaks to them reassembling and returning to the land of Israel, and then God putting his spirit on them. And this is the two-stage recovery of Israel from the exile.

First, God brought them physically back to the land through people like Zerubbabel and Ezra and Nehemiah. Then later, at Pentecost, he poured his spirit out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, as he said he would. And so both things that Ezekiel predicted did occur, but they began to occur because of Cyrus, who was a pagan.

But he was, in a sense, God's servant. And in the book of Isaiah, when it talks about the return of the exiles from Babylon, there are several oracles or songs or poems in Isaiah that are called the servant songs, the servant of Yahweh. And the servant songs, there are several of them, are quoted in the New Testament as being about Christ.

But there are some places where, in the same section of Isaiah, that refer to Cyrus as God's servant, in the same kind of language that the Messiah is referred to, although of course Cyrus is not the Messiah. I believe he's a type of the Messiah. But if you look at Isaiah chapter 44, Isaiah chapter 44 actually predicts that Cyrus will be the one that God will use to bring his people back to rebuild their temple and rebuild Jerusalem.

He says in chapter 44, 26 of Isaiah, Now Jesus is the good shepherd, but here Cyrus is said to be God's shepherd, who will perform all God's pleasure. Even saying to Jerusalem, you shall be built, and to the temple your foundation shall be laid. That's exactly what we read about happening in the first part of Ezra.

Chapter 45 of Isaiah continues, Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the armor of kings, to open before him the double door, so that the gate will not be shut. And so Isaiah predicts that God is going to use Cyrus to deliver Israel from their bondage and release them to go back and build the temple and build Jerusalem again. That's exactly what happened.

The most remarkable thing about that prophecy is perhaps the fact that it was uttered before Cyrus was born. Isaiah lived 150 years before Cyrus was born. Cyrus was 50 years old when he delivered Israel, so it was like 200 years before the time of Zerubbabel.

200 years before the deliverance of the people from Babylon, Isaiah had said they would be delivered by somebody named Cyrus. Now Josephus, the historian, tells us that Cyrus was actually motivated by that prophecy in Isaiah. According to Josephus, when Cyrus came to power, one of the Jewish priests brought to him the scrolls of Isaiah and showed him this prediction that even had his name in it.

200 years previously, God had spoken through Isaiah that Cyrus would let the people go, and that it was this scripture that inspired Cyrus actually to issue his decree. Now that may be true. Josephus, of course, we don't know where he got his information.

He didn't get it from the Bible because the Bible doesn't contain that particular information, so he might have been speculating. But on the other hand, he might have known something we don't know. It may be that the prophecy of Isaiah is what inspired Cyrus, and there would be something to be said for that theory because Cyrus, as we see in his decree, says, Yahweh has appointed me to build him a house in Jerusalem.

Now first of all, that a Persian king who is a pagan would speak of Yahweh, that's Israel's God, as giving him kingdoms and giving him an assignment and so forth, why would he speak so highly of Yahweh? It may be because he saw that Yahweh, through his prophets, had predicted Cyrus' activities, which would make a very profound impression. We will have to admit, though, that Cyrus was disposed to let people go back to their homes anyway, not only the Jews, but all the peoples that Nebuchadnezzar had taken away from their homelands when he conquered them and had brought them to Babylon. Cyrus issued similar decrees for them too, and so he was in general disposed to let people go back and rebuild their temples and their homes.

He intended, therefore, that he'd have their loyalty out of their gratitude, rather out of their fear. And so what Cyrus did, what is recorded of him doing here in Ezra, is known to be what he did in general. But, of course, the significant thing is that what he did in releasing the Jews allowed for significant prophecies to be fulfilled, Isaiah's and Jeremiah's, and, of course, for the sacred history of the Jews to continue to the point of eventually bringing Christ into the world.

So Cyrus was a not insignificant figure, a much better deliverer than Pharaoh. Pharaoh

had, of course, been the oppressor who had oppressed Israel the first time, and Nebuchadnezzar the second time. Cyrus functions almost like Moses, but really Zerubbabel and Ezra and the roles they played are much more similar to Moses.

In fact, in Jewish tradition, Ezra is the second most important character after Moses in the history of the nation of Israel. Of course, Abraham, before there was a nation of Israel, Abraham's the most important character of all in the Old Testament to the Jews. But in terms of the nation of Israel, Moses is first in importance and Ezra second in the mind of the Jews.

The Jews attribute a lot of things to Ezra that the Bible doesn't say, and they may be right or not about them. For example, there's five great accomplishments that the Talmud, which contains Jewish tradition of the rabbis, the Talmud attributes five great accomplishments to Ezra. These are not found in the book of Ezra or in the Bible at all, but I'll tell you what they are.

The first is that they say he established the great synagogue. Now, you read about synagogues all the time in the New Testament, but you don't read about any synagogues in the Old Testament, and that's because God didn't institute any synagogues in the time of Moses. Synagogues arose after or maybe during the Babylonian exile.

It's because there was no temple to keep the people centrally focused on God that the rabbis arose to teach the law and establish synagogues. According to Jewish tradition, the whole synagogue idea came about from Ezra, and there were, of course, local synagogues. One of the things they say he accomplished was the setting up of local synagogues.

The other is the establishment of the great synagogue. The great synagogue was almost like the Sanhedrin of a later period of time. It was made up of the chief spiritual leaders of the Jewish nation, rabbis, who would interpret laws and basically frame legislation for the Jewish community.

There were said to be 120 of them in the great synagogue. I don't know if it's a coincidence that there were 120 people in the upper room when the church was born. Its original leadership had the same number as the great synagogue.

I don't know of any significance to that, but it's an interesting coincidence. But the Jews believed that the great synagogue was established by Ezra and then also that local synagogues were. That's two great accomplishments.

Also, that the great synagogue, under Ezra's leadership, established the canon of the Old Testament scripture. Now, establishing the canon means deciding which books belonged in their Bible. Because there were a lot of Hebrew books and other books written by Jews

that were interesting, but they didn't all carry the weight of being prophetic or inspired books.

And so it is said in the Talmud that Ezra and the great synagogue, under his leadership, are the ones who decided which books would be accepted in the canon of scripture. So that is quite an accomplishment, if that's true. Of course, another, perhaps lesser accomplishment, is that he oversaw the change from Hebrew-style characters to Assyrian-style characters, a different kind of way of writing the language.

And that happened around his time, that he had some impact on changing from the old Hebrew-style characters to the more square Assyrian-type of characters of the scripture writings. And then one other thing is that they say he compiled and wrote the books of Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah. So four of our Old Testament books are said to be written by him in the Talmud.

So this man is believed to have done some great things. Now, by the way, all those things did occur approximately the time that Ezra lived. And there's no reason to doubt that he might well have been the one who did all those things.

All I'm saying is we don't have any historical information in the Bible telling us that he did, but the Jews believed that. And certainly they must have some traditions going back to the origins of those things. And they wouldn't have any interest in attributing them to someone who didn't do them.

Why would you want to fool yourself and your progeny as to who started the things that you do all the time, going to synagogue and so forth? So I tend to think that those traditions probably have more than a grain of truth. They may be entirely true. Ezra was a very important reformer, a very important person to the Jewish nation in their history, obviously.

We're going to look at these two sections of the book separately because they're very separate from each other. I want to say a few other things about the book that are kind of interesting. One is that about half of the book of Ezra is comprised of other documents that Ezra didn't originate.

He just brought them in. He imported them. Now, we know that because he tells us what they are.

Letters that people wrote to the Persian kings, usually against the Jews, and letters that Persian kings wrote back to the people about the Jews. And then there's in Ezra three very lengthy lists of names. In chapter two, which as you can see glancing at it is a very long chapter, 70 verses, much longer than the other chapters, it's entirely a list of names.

These are the names of the people who came back with Zerubbabel from the Babylonian

exile and returned with him to build the temple. Not all of them are named, but there's a long list of the important names. Not important to us.

We don't even know who any of these people are. They'll never be important to us unless we meet them in heaven and say, oh, so you're that guy I read about there in that verse. But really, they are unknown to us, but important to the Jews at the time to have these records of who's who and what they did.

Their family histories are important to them. For someone in a later generation, see my grandfather was one of those guys on that list. These would be official lists that somebody made before they made the trip.

Okay, everyone, roll call. Who's here? This guy here? This guy here? And those kinds of lists appear three times in Ezra. It's possible that Ezra wrote the list, but he didn't originate them.

The first list happened before Ezra was born. The people who came back with Zerubbabel, that list of names had to be made by somebody before Ezra was even alive. There's a second list later on in chapter 8, which has the names of, again, a lot of people who returned under Ezra's leadership in the second wave.

So we have a long list in chapter 2, a not quite so long list in chapter 8. And both of them are the lists of people or the leaders of the households who returned under Zerubbabel and Ezra respectively. And then in the last chapter of Ezra, it practically ends with a long list of names. And probably be about verse 18 or so to the end of the chapter 10, there's 110 names mentioned.

And these are people who had married the wrong women. Well, not just... Lots of people think they married the wrong woman, but these had married the wrong religious women. They married Canaanite women, which was forbidden, and they had to put them away.

They were not allowed to keep their wives or their children from those marriages. And the list at the end of Ezra is the list of the names of the guys who had to divorce women like that. Some of them were priests.

So we have these three long lists as well as several letters of correspondence between people in Palestine and the kings of Persia. And these separate documents that are included in Ezra make up almost half of its contents. Now, what this means is in some respects Ezra doesn't make very vigorous reading.

It's not like reading the story of David or the story of Samuel or the story of Joshua where there's a lot of action. Make a good movie. I guess Ezra could make a good movie too, but it wouldn't be an action film.

I mean, it's just in some ways very burdensome reading because of these long lists of

names and so forth. But you have some of that and a lot of that in Chronicles as well and in some other books. Even the first 16 verses of Matthew's Gospel are just a genealogy.

So those kinds of things happen in the Bible sometimes. But nonetheless, though it's not so much of a page turner as some parts of the Bible are, it's an important document. And while studying it, I would forgive you if you pass over chapter 2 in your reading.

Now, there are some people who are very anal and say, I need to read every word in the Bible. So you can do that. You can take the extra 10 minutes and read that list of names if you want to.

It won't hurt you. You've got the time. But there are some kinds of things there that you could probably pass over without any loss.

Because frankly, after you read the names, you know nothing more than before you read them. Because none of the names mean anything to you. But anyway, you at least know there's a lot of people who came.

So another interesting thing about Ezra that's not true of most books is that parts of it are not written in Hebrew originally. Now, almost the entire Old Testament is written in Hebrew. There are two books in the Old Testament that are written partially in Hebrew and partially in Aramaic.

Now, Aramaic was the language of the Middle East that was beginning to evolve very closely related to Hebrew. It was a Semitic language like Hebrew was. And a person who could read Hebrew could probably understand Aramaic reasonably well.

Sort of like a person who knows Portuguese could probably understand what a person speaking Spanish would say in many cases. Similar languages, but in the course of history, language evolves and so forth. And so the Hebrew language was being used less and less after the exile.

And Aramaic, which was Syrian language, was basically kind of taking over as a general use language. There's a couple of post-exilic books that have some portion of their contents written in Aramaic instead of Hebrew. But strangely, they also have much of their contents in Hebrew.

Ezra is one of them. Ezra has two sections in it that are written in Aramaic and the rest is in Hebrew. The first section that's written in Aramaic is chapter 4, verse 8 through chapter 6, verse 18.

Now, much of that contains correspondence with the Persian king. In fact, the Aramaic section begins at chapter 4, verse 8 with reciting the letter or including the letter that was written to the king of Persia. And then, of course, the part of chapter 6 that ends most of it, a lot of it, is also some more correspondence with the king of Persia.

So there is some narrative in there too that's in Aramaic, but the sections kind of begin and end with correspondence. That was probably in Aramaic to begin with, and Ezra must have just took those Aramaic documents, copied them into his book without translating into Hebrew, though he was writing in Hebrew prior to that. And he writes in Hebrew after that.

But there's another section that's written in Aramaic, and that is in chapter 7, verses 12 through 26. That too is a letter from Artaxerxes. So it does seem like the Aramaic portions in Ezra are largely dominated by these correspondences with these international letters, and Aramaic would be the language more broadly used.

You wouldn't write to the king of Persia in Hebrew. He'd have to get a translator in there for it. Aramaic he would understand and the Jews would understand, because those languages were tending to overlap around the time that this was written.

Now, I said there's another book of the Bible that has part Hebrew and part Aramaic, and that's the book of Daniel. Daniel has 12 chapters, and six of them are written in Hebrew and six are written in Aramaic. One thing that's interesting is the first chapter of Daniel is in Hebrew, and then chapters 2 through 7 are written in Aramaic, and then the rest of the book's in Hebrew.

Why would that be? Well, we're given no answer in the Bible itself, but I could say that the sections of Daniel that are written in Aramaic, chapters 2 through 7, are primarily prophecies concerning Gentile nations. They begin with Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the four kingdoms, and they end with Daniel's vision about the same four kingdoms, which are Babylon, Medieval Persia, Greece, and Rome. And so that section of Daniel largely has to do with the pagan nations, whereas maybe the rest of it would be more directly related to the Jews.

Anyway, I just let you know that, not that it's going to make any difference in the way you study, because you're reading Ezra in an English translation anyway, so it doesn't matter whether it's translated from Hebrew or from Aramaic. I just want you to know that it's an unusual book in that the author used two different languages in the writing of it. Okay, so on the notes I gave you, there's an outline of the book.

The bottom of the second page of the notes. As you can see, we recognize two major divisions. The first is the first return of Jews from Babylon under Zerubbabel.

That's chapters 1 through 6. The second segment is the second return of Jews from Babylon under Ezra, and that's chapters 7 through 10. And I basically have broken down into subunits there, which you can enjoy at your leisure. I'd like to actually look at the book itself to go through it and bring out some important points, if I could.

So, looking at chapter 1, we saw that verse 1 is very much like one of the last verses of

Chronicles, and then we have the Cyrus decree. Now, Ezra gives Cyrus the decree considerably more in detail than did Chronicles, although Ezra wrote Chronicles also. But here he just chooses not to abbreviate.

And here's how it goes in verses 2 through 4. Thus says King Cyrus of Persia, all the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God, that's Yahweh, God of heaven, has given me. Now, it's interesting that he recognizes that Yahweh has given him all these kingdoms. He's conquered the Babylonians, a pagan nation.

But he recognizes that the God of the Israelites is the one who gave this Persian the kingdom that had been given to the Babylonians before. Why would he do that? Most people would attribute their victories to their own gods. Most pagans believe that if they won wars, it's because their gods were the biggest, baddest gods on the block and had given them the victory.

In fact, they'd want to give honor to their gods for the victory. And yet, Cyrus apparently had become convinced that Yahweh, the God of Israel, had done this. Probably from reading Isaiah, I'm thinking.

It would take something to get a pagan king to speak this way. Because he'd normally be expected to be loyal to his own gods. And he definitely is not.

He says, and he has commanded me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Now, that command is, again, probably found in Isaiah 44 and 45. Who is there among you of all his people? May his God be with him.

Now let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of Yahweh, God of Israel. Then it says in parentheses, he is God. Now, that's an interesting thing to add.

He's already referred to as Yahweh God. You don't have to say he is God. You've already called him God.

But notice, in the context of a polytheistic world, a polytheistic king, he'd call many different gods God. But when he mentions Yahweh, he says, he's really God. He's God.

I mean, it's like he's placing emphasis on the fact that Yahweh isn't like other gods. He is actually God. Which is an amazing thing.

Because Nebuchadnezzar had come to the same conclusion through the influence of Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. You may remember when Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dreams favorably, Nebuchadnezzar said, your God is the true God. And when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were delivered from the fire of furnace, Nebuchadnezzar said, everyone should worship the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

He's the real God. And then in chapter 4 of Daniel, when Nebuchadnezzar had a dream about a tree that was cut down and so forth, and then came back alive, Daniel interpreted that, that's you, Nebuchadnezzar, you're going to be insane for seven years, and then you're going to acknowledge God properly. And then you'll be restored.

Sure enough, Nebuchadnezzar experienced a period of seven years of insanity, and at the end he came to a sense, the first thing he says, the God of Israel, Yahweh, he's the real God. Now what's interesting here is that the Babylonian exile, therefore, resulted in the evangelization of these pagan kings. Nebuchadnezzar probably wouldn't have even known who Yahweh was.

He'd probably have to consult his priest or scholar, say, who's Yahweh? Oh, he's the God of those people way over 700 miles from here. You can look him up on the internet if you want, but you can't really probably ever have contact with these people. And yet, because the Jews were carried away into Babylon, into the corridors of power of the pagan world, the witness for Yahweh convinced pagan kings that Yahweh was the true God.

And this is true not only of the Babylonians, but when the Persians conquered the Babylonians, the Persian king Cyrus, seeing Isaiah's prophecy apparently, had the same impression. Wow, he's the real God. Now what this tells us is that God is a good economist.

He can get more than one result out of one action. He sent Israel into captivity because they were bad and they were being punished and they were being disciplined. And yet, their troubles allowed God to be recognized and honored among the most powerful Gentiles in the world, the rulers of the Gentiles as well.

And so you never can tell when God's dealings in your life, even painful dealings, may be something he has in mind to be a witness to other people that you would just soon not. I'm sure the Jews would just soon not have gotten into captivity. But God had something to gain from it, and that was recognition from these rulers, and we can see he got it.

And verse 4 says, Whoever remains in any place where he sojourns, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God, which is in Jerusalem. What he's saying is, I'm not commanding anyone to go. You Jews, if you want to stay here in Persia now, you're welcome to do that, but you're free to go.

But if you don't go, you need to help those people who are going financially. You need to give them gold and silver and all the goods they need so that they can build the temple. So everybody who's a Jew has to participate in the rebuilding of the temple, whether they are actual builders, whether they are traveler missionaries, or whether they stay home and support the work.

Now, by the way, the Bible says that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are living stones built up into a spiritual temple, Peter said in 1 Peter 2, 5. And the past 2,000 years has been the constructing of the habitation of God through the Spirit. That's what Paul calls it in Ephesians 2. He says that we are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone in whom the whole building fitly framed together grows into the holy habitation of the Lord through the Spirit.

Now, the church is a building, so to speak, figuratively speaking. We're like individual building components built into one big building worldwide that God inhabits. When God is on earth, he lives in a house, and we are that house he lives in.

Now, that house is under construction. I don't know if you've noticed that the church could use some improvement. I'm not talking about the building we're in.

This one could use some improvement probably too. I'm talking about the spiritual body of Christ. The church is not as holy as God has commanded it to be.

The church is not as obedient, is not as evangelistic, is not as unified. There are many ways in which the church is not what it must be. It's still under construction.

The spiritual construction of the body of Christ or of the temple of the Holy Spirit is something that we are to be involved in. We are to build up. The word edify means to build like a building.

Paul said that God gave some to the church who are apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the building up, edification of the body of Christ. The church is a building being built up by the work of ministers and so forth. Everyone in the body of Christ has to be involved.

Not everyone is a preacher. Not everyone is a missionary. Not everyone is going to travel from Babylon over to Jerusalem or across the ocean to carry the gospel to other lands.

Some will. Some will be building right on the site. Others, as it were, simply are there to do what they can.

They don't go anywhere, but they support those who do. And that's basically analogous to what Cyrus is requiring of the Jews. You don't go, you support the ones who do.

Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites, with all those whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the Lord, which is Jerusalem. So those that came were the ones that God's spirit had moved. Zerubbabel didn't have to do some kind of a recruiting campaign.

As soon as the option of serving God and building his temple was made known, certain

Jews, not all Jews, but certain Jews, their hearts were moved. They said, I want to be involved with that. I want to do that.

The Holy Spirit's moving me to go and to build this thing. And, you know, God will always provide the workers for his projects by his spirit moving people to do it. I've never been one who believed much in any kind of gimmicks for building large congregations or advertising ministries to build them up in the way that businesses build up their business.

I believe the church is built by Christ, by his own activity. Jesus said, upon this rock, I will build my church. Jesus does the building.

He does it by moving people's spirits, moving their hearts to submit to him, to surrender him, to become his children and his fellow workers. Like Paul said, we are co-laborers with God. So I believe the work of God is done by the inspiration of God's spirit, moving the hearts of God's people to do what they do.

And I think that's true of every aspect of it. Now, I realize that human beings who are in ministry can stir people up. But I think the more that people do that, especially the more they manipulate people's emotions and things like that, the less there is any certainty that the work is God's work at all.

Because it's entirely possible to build religions. Think how many cults there are. Think how many false religions there are.

Huge religions. You can build a big religion without God. But you can't build God's temple.

You can't do God's work. That's God's doing. And his Holy Spirit is given to us to do that.

And so those that God's spirit had moved volunteered to go. And all those who were around them encouraged them with articles of silver and gold and goods and livestock and with precious things besides all that was willingly offered. King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and had put in the temples of his gods.

And Cyrus, the king of Persia, brought them out by the hand of Mithridat, the treasurer, and counted them out to Shesh-bazar, the prince of Judah. Now this Shesh-bazar is never explained who he is except he's called the prince of Judah. He is mentioned again in chapter 5 briefly only in the sense that a letter written to the Persian kings mentions that these goods had been given to the hands of Shesh-bazar at an earlier date.

And there are many theories among scholars as to whom Shesh-bazar should be identified with. I personally believe Shesh-bazar is probably just another name for Zerubbabel because without any explanation Zerubbabel is forever after we'd refer to as

the governor of the people of Judah at this time. Shesh-bazar is said to have carried the articles down there.

But next, we never hear of him again and we only hear of Zerubbabel. And I think this is another name for Zerubbabel just like Daniel had the name Belteshazzar given him and he's called by both names in the book of Daniel. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, those are Babylonian names.

They had Hebrew names also that are given in scriptures. Lots of people are known by more than one name. Even some of the apostles.

Simon, the Hebrew name Simeon, was given a Greek name by Jezreel, probably Cephas. And we know him by the Greek name Peter. So I mean the same person is often known by different names in the Bible.

And so I personally think the easiest way to solve the Shesh-bazar mystery is to say it's another name for Zerubbabel. There are some who theorize that it's another person who maybe didn't remain in leadership for very long. Maybe he died on the journey and Zerubbabel took over.

But we're told nothing about it. So we don't have to know. But probably the solution easiest to swallow is that it's another name for Zerubbabel.

This is the number of them. Thirty gold platters, etc., etc. We're not going to read all that stuff.

The articles of gold that they took. Now chapter two, as I said, is just a list of names. We're not going to read any of them.

It's just a list of the names of people who volunteered to go back to Jerusalem and be part of this project. Chapter three has some narrative. It really says, In the seventh month, when it had come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.

Then Jeshua the son of Jehoshadach, which was the priest, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brethren, arose and built the altar of the Lord of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. Though fear had come upon them because of the people of these countries, they set the altar on its base, and they offered burnt offerings to the Lord on it, both in the morning and the evening offerings. They also kept the Feast of Tabernacles, because it was the seventh month, that's the time to do it, as it is written.

And then it talks about they also continued their regular offerings after that. Now it should be pointed out that this all happened even though they hadn't laid the foundation of the temple yet. This altar would eventually be part of the temple system, but although

they hadn't done the first thing to build the temple, they wanted an altar immediately so they could start worshipping God, offering the proper sacrifices and so forth right from the very beginning.

You know in the Old Testament that was a very important part of worship, was the offering of sacrifices. When Noah came out of the ark, the first thing he did was offer animal sacrifices to worship God, as a way of honoring God. When Abraham went from place to place, every time he moved from one place to camp somewhere else, he built an altar there and offered sacrifices to God there.

This was a way of just saying, I'm recognizing God, I'm honoring God, I'm worshipping God, for my progress up to this point. I just want to make sure that God gets all the credit. And so they built this altar, although they were afraid of the people.

We find they had some reason to be afraid of the people, they received some opposition. But then they began to restore the temple, they laid the foundation of the temple. And when they laid the foundation of the temple, it met with mixed reviews.

Let me just read it here. All the Levites from 20 years old and above, says in verse 8, were overseeing the work. Then we have reference to different people doing different projects.

And they sang, the people sang responsibly, verse 11, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever. Then all the people shouted with a great shout. They're celebrating the fact that the, not that the temple has been rebuilt, but the foundation has been laid.

That's all they've done. They've just laid the foundation slab. And they shouted a great shout and they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers' houses who were old men, who had seen the first temple, they had seen Solomon's temple before the exile, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes. Yet many shouted aloud for joy so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people. For the people shouted with a loud shout and the sound was heard afar off.

Now, there's a lot of noise. Some of it's celebrating, laughing, shouting. Others were weeping.

And if I know priests, Jewish people, when they mourn, they don't mourn quietly. I mean, they're moaning, groaning, I'm sure. And the groaning and the shouting were all mixed together.

It says you couldn't tell who was doing what. But you could tell some people were not happy. There were some people... Now, you might say, well, they're weeping for joy.

That's a possibility. I mean, people could weep for joy. But I don't think that's the case here.

We have some idea of what they're mourning about given to us in the book of Haggai. Now, Haggai was one of the prophets that was contemporary at the time, helping them to build the temple. Zechariah and Haggai were both prophets at the time.

And we'll study their books a separate time, of course, in the future. But I want you to see something that Haggai says. And he's talking to the people of that generation, that time.

In chapter 2 of Haggai, verses 3 and 4, he says, Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? That is, how many of you remember Solomon's Temple? Well, we just read about some of them in Ezra. And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing? In other words, in comparison with Solomon's Temple, this was nothing. Solomon had an unlimited budget and an unlimited workforce for his temple.

He took charge of the country at the richest time in Israel's history. Ezra, not Ezra, but Zerubbabel and his group had come with a pretty good budget, but nothing like Solomon had. They had to settle for a smaller temple.

Already when the foundation was laid, those guys who remembered Solomon's Temple said, Whoa, this is not going to be anything like Solomon's Temple. Look at the size of this. It's practically nothing.

And they seemed to weep at the fact that, Well, I guess we're going to have a temple again, but it's not going to be like what we ever had before. And they mourned. But Haggai speaks to them and says, Does this seem like nothing to you? Does it seem compared to Solomon's Temple like it's nothing? In verse 4 he says, Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel, says the Lord, and be strong, Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and be strong, all you people of the land, says the Lord, and work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts.

According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so my spirit remains among you. Do not fear. So the prophet has to encourage him because some of the way this is, this is nothing like what we lost.

Is this even worth it? It seems like nothing. And Haggai says, No, the Lord is with you. The spirit of God is with you.

You need to keep working on this because this is God's project. And thus ends chapter 3.

Now, we're not going to go in detail in the other chapters, but let me just say that in chapter 4, they began to encounter opposition. The people of Zerubbabel were foreign people from other nations who had been resettled into the region that had been Galilee before, or the northern kingdom.

Had not been Galilee, had been the northern kingdom of Israel. These people are what later were known as Samaritans. They had been at an earlier time in the 720s BC when the Assyrians had conquered the region.

Remember, the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians, but so was everyone else. And what the Assyrians did, they took people from their homeland and relocated them to some other land, just so there wouldn't be any patriotic movements in the lands that were conquered by locals wanting to overthrow the oppressor. Just get them out of there and they can't have any kind of uprising.

So they reshuffled the populations from different lands, and people of Israel were taken out into other countries, and people from other countries were brought into there. Now, in Chronicles it says, and in Kings, that a result of this was that the people were mixed. Some were Jewish and some were pagan.

And it says, and they worshipped Yahweh and served other gods. So this is why the Samaritans were hated by the Jews in Jesus' day. They were kind of half-breed biologically and half-breed religiously.

They recognized Yahweh, but they worshipped other gods too. They had some Jewish blood in them, because they all had intermarried, but they had Gentile blood too. So they were just kind of mixed, religiously and racially.

You know, the Jews, how proud they are of their race and of their religion. They just looked down on Gentiles, and they especially looked down on Jews who had mixed with the Gentiles and their offspring. So that's why in Jesus' day so many Jews hated the Samaritans.

That's who these people were opposing Zerubbabel. They were these foreigners that had been brought in by the Assyrians. And they say, hey, we worshipped your god too.

Yeah, they did, and they served other gods too. And they said, let us help you build the temple. And Zerubbabel said, no, it's just going to be us Jews, not you.

We're just going to build it ourselves. And this offended these guys, and so they wrote a letter to the Persian rulers to ask if these guys had sanction to do this. Now, they didn't write the letter immediately.

First it says they hired counselors against them, which is like lawyers. It's like they harassed them with trivial lawsuits. They distracted them from the building.

You can see this. It says in verse 4, the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus, king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius, the king of Persia.

Now, on your notes I've given you a list of some of the kings of Persia. Since most of you probably could not recite the kings of Persia, who can? Well, there were about 11 kings of Persia apparently, but the first six of them are relevant to our story. It's on the bottom of the first page of your notes.

The first king of Persia was Cyrus the Great. He's the one who made the edict that we read about in chapter 1. Then he was followed by Cambyses, who is not mentioned in scripture, unless he's the Ahasuerus that we read about in Ezra 4, 6. We'll talk about that in a moment. I don't think he is.

Some think so. Then there's a guy named Gamata, who only reigned for like seven months. Some think he's the Artaxerxes of Ezra 4, 7. I don't think so, but some do.

Then there was Darius I. Now, notice it says that they harassed these Jews through all the reign of Cyrus until the first year of Darius. So the reigns of Cambyses and Gamata were included that period of time. That whole period of time, these Jews were harassed, and they discouraged them so that they didn't continue working on the temple.

However, if you look further on up to verse 24, it says, Thus the work of the house of God, which is at Jerusalem, ceased, and it was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius, the king of Persia. So you can see which kings were in between and how long that was delayed. It was delayed for about 20 years.

There's a section here then in chapter 4, verses 6 through 23 that seems to be out of chronological order because it says in verse 6, Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, that's Xerxes, Esther's husband, who did not live at this time. You can look on your list of kings that he came after Darius I. It says, In the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of this reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. We don't read of it causing any problems, perhaps because Esther was the queen at the time.

Perhaps the king was disposed to ignore those who were pestering the Jews because his wife Esther was the queen, a Jew. But in verse 7 it says, In the days of Artaxerxes also, now Artaxerxes came after Xerxes. He's the one who sent Ezra back and also Nehemiah back at a later date.

But apparently what's happening here is it's just looking forward. It's kind of, this is a parenthetical section. It says before this, they harassed him until the first year of King Darius, and then it comes back to Darius on the last verse of the chapter.

In between all those verses, and you know, they harassed the Jews at later days too. In

the days of Xerxes, they wrote a letter against them. In the days of Artaxerxes, they wrote a letter against them.

But that's not happening at this time. It's kind of looking forward into fairly distant future times, basically saying, these people who are harassing them here, well, this wasn't the last time. If you want to look forward several kings up, you'll find they did it in the reign of Xerxes and Artaxerxes also.

And that's what it's saying. It can confuse you because this whole letter, there's a letter here that's written to Artaxerxes, and then a letter back from Artaxerxes telling them to stop working on the temple. But that didn't happen at this time.

And so it's rather confusing. Chapter 4 is rather confusing because this whole section, which is not in its chronological order. Okay, so in the second year of Darius, they started again.

And in Chapter 5, verse 1 says, The prophet Haggai and Zechariah began to stir the people up, and they began to work on the temple again. Now, when we study Zechariah and Haggai later on, we'll find that that's exactly what their message was. It's telling these people, get off your duff and start building the temple again.

That's what these prophets did. They encouraged these people, and they supported Joshua and Zerubbabel in the leadership. And so we read in Chapter 5 that as they did begin the work, they were opposed again by these Samaritans.

And the Samaritans wrote a letter in this case to King Darius. Now, King Darius had nothing against the Jews, didn't know much about them. But these local Samaritans wrote a letter to Darius and said, You know, there's these Jews here, and they're troublemakers, and they are building a temple here, and I'm not sure you'd be happy about it.

Let me tell you about these people. They say that they were given a permission from Cyrus to come and do this, and we doubt it. And we'd like you to look into this and tell us whether we should let them continue or tell them to stop.

Well, as it turns out, Darius did look into it, and he found documents that proved that Cyrus had in fact given permission. So he writes back to them. This is all in Chapter 5. And he says, Listen, don't hinder these people.

They are authorized. Cyrus did give them permission, so give them all the assistance they need. And so because of this, from Darius, this permission that was official, they were able to sort of reactivate the charge they'd received from Cyrus, and they did finish the temple.

And when they finished it, they dedicated it and celebrated in a big way. And that's what

Chapter 6 is about. And at the end of it, they celebrated Passover because that's the season they finished in.

They finished at Passover time, so they actually celebrated Passover for the first time in the new temple. And that's the end of the story of Zerubbabel. The last four chapters are about Ezra.

And as I said, there's a 60-year gap between Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. And in that gap, the story of Esther belongs. We'll study Esther in due time. But it chronologically fits between Chapter 6 and 7 of Ezra.

But now we have Ezra himself, and we're not going to read much detail about here. We're introduced to him. He's a priest.

His lineage is given, going back to Aaron in the first five verses. And it says in Verse 6, This Ezra came up from Babylon and was a skilled scribe, that means a Bible scholar, in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given. The king granted him all his requests according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him.

And some of the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and others went with him. Now, what happened here is this is the reign of Artaxerxes much later than the earlier story. And Artaxerxes gave Ezra permission to go back and help just encourage the work and to take resources that were actually given to him by King Artaxerxes to help enhance the temple that had already been built.

Now, the temple had long been built, but it needed some, you know, tender loving care. Probably a little more gold here and there rubbed on it. So he gave him gold and silver and stuff to take and a bunch of priests went with him.

And so Ezra goes back. Now, one of the most important verses about Ezra, and there aren't very many verses about him, is in Verse 10, or Verse 9 and 10. On the first day of the first month, he began his journey from Babylon.

And on the first day of the fifth month, so four months later, he came to Jerusalem. It was about a 700-mile trip. It took four months to make.

According to the good hand of his God upon him, which is just a way of saying that God blessed his journey and protected him. For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances. Now, this verse is a great verse.

It says that God had his hand on this man's ministry. And we know that he did bring a great revival. And he did, he was mightily used of God.

It says he had prepared his heart. It's not that God prepared it. My Calvinist friends say

that man can't prepare his heart because he's desperately wicked and, you know, it takes, God has to prepare the heart.

But everywhere I read in the Bible is about people have to prepare their hearts. It's often referred to people preparing their hearts, and he did. He prepared his heart to what? To seek the law of the Lord, to do it, and to teach it.

That is, to learn it, seeking it means he's studying it out. He wants to know what God said. He wants to know what God requires.

He wants to master it for his own sake first, because he wants to do it. He wants to obey it. And then, once he knows it and obeys it, he can teach it to others.

And this is a very important sequence, because some people want to go directly from Bible school and teach. And maybe they can, if they're doing what they've learned. But there's an important step between learning and teaching, and that is doing it.

James said, be doers of the word and not hearers only. If you're a hearer of the word and not a doer, you're fooling yourself. You're deceiving yourself.

And this man wanted to study diligently. He set his heart to it, to study the law and to do it. He wanted to live it out.

He wanted to be obedient. If he never taught another person, he wanted to at least know that he was doing what God wanted him to do in his life. He was obedient to the law.

And then, finally, he would have credibility to teach it. And apparently, this is what he did. Now, the chapter has a copy of a letter, which is in Aramaic, in verse 12 and following, which is Artaxerxes' letter.

Basically, you don't need to read it now, but he's basically the letter that allowed Ezra to go back with the king's sanction and take people with him and do stuff in Jerusalem. So, essentially, the chapter introduces Ezra, tells us that he went back, and gives us a copy of the letter that he had from the king, Artaxerxes' sanction. Chapter 8, then, is a list, or part of it is a list, of people.

And these are families. Up through verse 20, it's just people and families that went back with Ezra, just like we had in chapter 2, a list of people who went with Zerubbabel. Now we have a list of people who went back with Ezra.

A much smaller group, a couple thousand instead of 50,000, but still a large group to travel with. But verse 21 says, In other words, I had boasted that God takes care of his people. And now we're going on a dangerous journey, and probably the king would have been glad to send a detachment of soldiers to protect us, but I didn't, I was afraid to ask, I was ashamed to ask.

It would be embarrassing. Because I just said God takes care of us. If I asked for soldiers to go with us too, he might say, I thought you said God takes care of you.

Now, of course, God does take care of people through human agency many times. But there are special promises, and there are special favors that God does for people who trust him. Which, if you're trusting him, you don't need to get people involved in this.

I think of George Mueller. He believed that God had taught that if you do God's work and seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then all things you need will be added to you. He believed that.

It's in the Bible. He boasted of it. And so he started to work with orphans and took care of more than 10,000 orphans over a period of 70 years and never would ask for money because he believed God said he'll take care of it.

God said he'll provide. If I'm just seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then he'll add all that's necessary. He believed it, and he refused ever to ask anyone for money.

He believed it would show that he didn't believe what God had said if he asked for money. And you know what? He didn't have to ask for money because he did do the will of God, and God did provide for him. Millions of dollars.

They say in today's terms, about \$8 million was donated to his orphanages over the years. And he gave away more than he needed, you know, for the orphans. An incredible man.

There's many biographies of Mueller, but Hudson Taylor, same thing, one of the first missionaries to inland China. He had the same philosophy Mueller did. He wouldn't ask for money, wouldn't let people know when he had needs.

He said if there's a God out there, the promise is that he'll take care of me. If I do his work, he'll provide. And he was right.

He was one of the greatest missionaries to China his whole lifetime. He never asked for money, but God provided. Same thing when he needed personnel, needed help, workers.

He just asked God. He wouldn't recruit. Well, actually, Hudson Taylor sometimes did go to England and recruit, but George Mueller wouldn't recruit for his orphanages.

He waited for God to provide people who God's spirit moved to do it. You know, we don't, churches run like business today, and almost everything in the kingdom of God is run like a worldly enterprise today. And so advertising and fundraising and, you know, recruiting and all that kind of stuff, it's all just as much a part of church and religious life today as it is part of any secular business.

But it doesn't have to be. It just seems foreign to us to really trust God. I mean, we say that God has these promises.

We say that God will do such things. But then we do an awful lot to try to make sure that we're cushioned, you know, in case maybe he doesn't. I remember a friend of mine who never had insurance, and he used to say, you know, well, insurance is just a way of making sure that if God rips you off of everything, you can get it all back.

That may be an oversimplification, but, and he's dead now, but it wasn't because of lack of insurance. But the thing is that, you know, there is such a thing as just imbibing the spirit of our culture and bringing it into Christian life and Christian ministry and church life and doing things the way that the world does them. Because although we say God will do this, God has made promises, and we're not so sure that he will.

Ezra knew that he could boast in God, and he would not ask for support, although he could have. And then chapter 8 simply has him returning. What happens in chapter 9 and 10, it's all one big story.

Essentially, almost as soon as he got to Jerusalem, he was informed that a lot of the Jewish men had married Canaanite women, which was not okay. And he was so grieved by it. He fasted, he prayed, he mourned, he tore his hair out.

He said, I tore my hair out. Now, Nehemiah, when he found out things like that, he did it a little differently. When he heard that the Jews were making these compromises, he tore their hair out.

You'll see that when you read the book of Nehemiah. I tore some of their hair out, he said, but Ezra just tore his own hair out. These Jews get emotional sometimes, and I guess hair is one of the things you can grab real quick to take out your wrath upon or something.

But he used his own hair, and Nehemiah used other people's hair. But it was a very grievous thing, because of course the community was in danger of going the same direction as the previous Israel had gone, which ended up in them going into captivity, into idolatry. So, basically what happened is one of the leaders of Israel said to Ezra, listen, we can take care of this.

We can put away all these wives. And so they set up a day for everyone to come out to get rebuked by Ezra. And Ezra prayed in their presence, and there's a really moving prayer that he prays there in chapter 9. Or is it chapter 10? I think it's chapter 9. He has the prayer.

And then chapter 10 just tells about how they actually implemented the divorcing of these wives and putting them away. And like I said, most of the last part from verse 18 to the very end of the book in chapter 10 is just the list of the names of people who put

their wives away. So it's kind of anticlimactic in terms of excitement in the book.

But it is nonetheless an important record of how Ezra led the people into an uncompromising following of God's laws. Because he had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and do it and teach in Israel statutes and judgments. Now Ezra is still living in the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah comes later. But in chapter 8 of Nehemiah we see that Nehemiah and Ezra are ministering side by side. When we come to Nehemiah, it's going to be all about Nehemiah for the most part and his activities.

But there is mention of Ezra being there. So it was within the lifetime of Ezra that Nehemiah came. But his story is going to have to wait for another time because we've run out of time for tonight.